DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 311 213 CE 053 196

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TITLE Remembering "The Forgotten Half." A Teacher Urges Realistic Curriculum Reform.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Education; *Curriculum Development; *Educational Improvement; Educational Needs; *Education Work Relationship; Foreign Countries; *General Education; High Schools; *High School Students; *Noncollege Bound Students; Technical Education; Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS West Germany

ABSTRACT

Although more than one-half of U.S. high school graduates do not go on to college, the high school curriculum fails to meet the needs of this "forgotten half." Curriculum reformers have focused on strengthening the curriculum; however, most of their suggestions are appropriate only for those in the college preparatory curriculum. The students who are not going to college (and are not receiving special help as "at-risk" students) tend to be bored and forgotten as they pursue irrelevant and watered-down academic curriculum. What is needed is a new approach that will meet the needs of these students, as well as the needs of the work force for educated workers. Other countries accomplish this task better than the United States. West Germany, for example, has a system of academic education for a small percentage of high school students, with cooperative technical education or vocational training in conjunction with employers for the majority of 16- to 19-year-olds. Reforming the curriculum with such a realistic idea in mind would make high school much more profitable for the majority of students and provide educated workers for the future. (KC)

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REMEMBERING "THE FORGOTTEN HALF"

A TEACHER URGES REALISTIC CURRICULUM REFORM

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

"This English class is worthless. When I'm putting up drywall in the construction business, who will ask, 'Hey, do you know Stephen Crane's works? Steinbeck's? Mark Twain's? No. Classes like this are useless. 'Hands on' classes are important. That's what we need." A youth in one of the three sections of "Eleventh Grade Survey" I taught last year respectfully volunteered this candid comment.

His remark illustrates my concern that secondary academic curricula and textbooks, mainly geared to the level of college-bound students, simply do not meet the needs of over fifty percent of our high school students. Recent statistics spotlight the educational level which 1980 U.S. seniors had attained by 1986:

Failed to graduate	.9
High school graduation or equivalent	61.8
License	11.9
Associate degree	6.5
University undergrad degree	18.2
Graduate, professional degree	.7

(source: U.S. Dept. of Education, Digest of Educational Statistics, 1988)

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Too often neither secondary academic curricula nor textbooks address the interest and needs of average-ability students -- the majority sometimes called "Mid-Kids", "Unspecials", or "The Forgotten Half" (the latter from The Forgotten Half: Non-College Youth in America, Grant Foundation, 1988).

Large portions of the curricula are, for these students, simply meaningless. Many sources document our failure to reach and teach the "Forgotten Half" (80% of whom are white). For students taking mainly general courses (English, science, social studies, math) the "educational" experience is neither productive nor rewarding.

Already we are seeing the distressing results of societal and educational failure as many young citizens leave school -- with or without a high school diploma. Ineligible for the workforce, most face a maze of obstacles, alpine in dimension. Unlike their college-bound peers, they do not have the advantage of large financial investment in their next four or more years.

> "We cannot look to educational remedies as a cure-all, especially when the malady is essentially economic in character....We must view non-college-bound youth as victims of a set of institutional arrangements governing their passage from schooling to employment....It is far easier to blame our young for their shortcomings (and simultaneously to blame the schools for improperly preparing them to work) than to examine our society's lack of an effective institutional bridge between schooling and careers." (The Forgotten Half)

Political, business and educational leaders must join forces -- with local and state support -- to envision and plan effective

restructuring of our educational system. Research must include study of educational systems in most European nations and Japan. Selected best features of each could be adapted for use in some or many American comprehensive high schools .There is no panacea. Yet American states, communities and educational districts must be open to discovery and change -- also willing to work together,and compromise.

A Nation at Risk, report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), "ignited the debate over excellence in education, and our nation's future." A worthy achievement. Yet, ignoring needs of average-ability students, it recommends for all a program of tough "new basics":(a) English, 4 years; (b) math, 3; (c) science, 3; (d) social studies, 4; (e) computer science, ½ year. The report also calls for longer school days and years, stiffer graduation requirements, more testing, accountability, and so on. Two assumptions underlie these recommendations: (1) reform is not a societal responsibility but strictly up to the schools; (2) all high school students are capable of meeting the challenge of these "new basics," and benefiting from them. This is lofty, admirable, idealistic -- and utterly unrealistic! So pressured, many students will simply drop out, ignored in the new as in the old patterns.

Entering the "debate over excellence in education and our nation's future" I urge serious review and radical reform of high school curricula -- with equitable, democratic concern for the non-college bound senior high students (grades 10-12) as well as for all other high school students.

In most comprehensive high schools the curriculum favors students in the college-prep track. Except in some vocational classes, educational needs of the "Forgotten Half" are simply unrecognized, ignored, unmet. Students label the curriculum "boring", "irrelevant" failing their needs, interests, goals, ambitions. Small wonder that "of the 3.8 million 18-year-old Americans in 1988, fully 700,000 had dropped out of school and another 700,000 could not read their high school diplomas." (Fortune,11/7/88). If we go on this way disaster surely lies ahead.

Motivated, adolescents learn. These same students eagerly learn to read driver-training manuals. Many absorb everything they can about engines and maintenance to improve the efficiency of their 'hot rods'. For them, this is useful learning.

General ability students commonly do not learn how to learn, to read, to think critically --because they are primarily confronted with content which they assess as meaningless. If proverbially beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so is meaning. Edited versions of Beowulf, The Canterbury Tales, and Macbeth (three selections in the assigned text provided for use with "Senior English" students) are a foreign language to them. Such intellectual materials, however noble their place in the established canon of English letters, frustrate and discourage general-ability youngsters.

Historical, cultural, economic, societal causes of the educational crisis are discussed by others elsewhere. This essay only points to a serious systemic deficit: our American secondary school program does not adequately -- if at all -- meet the needs of over one half of its students. For the students, that's a catastrophe. For the nation it's a disaster. I strongly propose structural educational reform: providing every American student with an equal opportunity from pre-kindergarten through ninth grade. At the 10th grade level, offer each student either a strong college-prep curriculum (including career counseling) -- or realistic vocational/technical career curricula and schooling leading to further education in appropriate subject matters or apprenticeship and related employment. Advise all students to keep their options open, and to prepare for transitions available. Involve parents.

Now, let us look at a very different educational pattern.

> "The West German system provides a useful model. Almost three-fourths of young Germans get classroom instruction in one of more than 400 trades, plus on-the-job experience.

> Training usually begins at age 15 or 16, typically when U.S. teens drop out, and continues for upwards of three years. State governments pay for classroom instruction, which comes to about one day a week, while employers pay wages, which average over $500 per month. This system is probably the reason that West Germany has one of the lowest youth unemployment rates of any country in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development." (Business Week, 7/3/89)

Schools in Germany are noted for academic excellence. Student motivation is high, achievement prized. Parents pay outside tutors rather than allow failure. With no 'social promotion', discipline is highly valued.

The German educational system allows for long-term planning and choice. Academic and career counseling enhances all programs:

> a) the academic high school programs lead to university or technical college;
>
> b) the advanced technical program in high school leads to technical college or other higher education;
>
> c) vocational programs in high school lead to a more advanced vocational school, apprenticeship, and employment. (Source: Education in West Germany, Phi Delta Kappan Educational Foundation, Lingens & Lingens, 1980).

Many if not most of America's "Forgotten Half" who now struggle to finish high school (while benefiting little) would drop current required coursework to take advantage of such a program if it were available. But business, industry and school cooperation would be absolutely essential. Such training and experience more closely oriented to productive employment would serve inner city youth (now so desperately ignored) and minority youth equally.

If all youth in United States comprehensive high schools were educated equitably -- and if only 20% of West German youth were well served in the prestigious (gymnasium) high school, a base of comparison would be lacking.

But this is not the case. The West German system provides for all students of varying interests and abilities. On the contrary, the U.S. educational system actually neglects its high school "middle half" -- those non-college bound and "unspecial" high school students.

In theory American secondary schools prepare their"academically talented elite" in the comprehensive curricula. In reality these students are selectively tracked. Advanced Placement classes are available to them in English, American History, Science and Mathematics, etc. In cooperation with colleges each Advanced Placement (AP) course yields both both high school and college credit upon successful completion. Advanced classes also separate college-prep students from those of average ability. (I indeed favor these classes for the academically talented; I teach some of them. I favor tracking in certain academic subjects -- from 10th grade possibly, certainly 11th and 12th). A "teacher for the talented", freed of other duties, promotes the "gifted program," and serves certain talented students. High school counselors mainly serve college bound students, also.

My point: students of average-abililty, the middle majority, equally deserve quality classes and textbooks addressed to their interests, abilities and needs.

"The United States ranks 49th among 158 member nations of the U.N. in its literacy levels" (J. Kozol, Illiterate America). This should shock us into admitting that our school system isn't working for many students. The secondary curricula must become a focal point for review and reform -- possibly along lines of West Germany's system.

"If American schools are to develop secondary programs that are both more stringent for those who are academically able and more

appropriate for those whose strengths and interests are less academic, it will need to be done in a manner which continues to foster general equality of opportunity and which does not isolate students (including those of general ability) from long-range educational and career choices."(Alan Jones, private letter to the author)

High school curriculum -- what should be taught, from which textbooks, and by which methods -- is constantly being reshaped, but haphazardly. Quoting a high school student, the Introduction of Shopping Mall High School begins, "It's a big job to make up a curriculum that everybody can do." The book tells how some high schools approach this monumental, exhausting task. Its central theme is that some high schools "proceed by making numerous and different accomodations with assertive, verbal students to achieve the results everyone desires. High schools offer accomodations to maximize holding power, graduation percentages, and customer satisfaction."

In the chapter on the "Unspecial", one reads: "Special students at either end of the school curriculum have some "clearly defined purpose," but there's "no clear and definite objective for those in the middle....We don't have a curriculum for them."

Textbooks, a major support of curriculum, also do not serve general-ability students. Diluted, simplified versions of college-prep texts ignore reality. They are neither efficient, effective, nor equitable. Textbooks for the "Mid Kids" must be re-thought, re-written, addressed to the needs, interests and abilities of non-college-bound youth.

Young Americans are the nation's hope for strong decades ahead, deserving for their own good and our national common good the educational reform we propose here. Indeed national security has far more to do with the caliber of our schools than more nuclear warheads, Stealth bombers and aircraft carriers. As a poster has it, "It will be a great day when our schools get the money they need and the Air Force has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber!"

A coalition of political, business and educational leaders, supported by communities and states, must plan and guide a thoughtful restructuring in education in the common interests of all American children and youth. Along this road we can more realistically in our time pick up once again the challenge given by Lincoln, "that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of ...by...and for the people shall not perish from the earth." Our response to that is still an open question.

Catherine Schwarz lives with her husband in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She has over thirty years of teaching experience, and is the editor of Chalk Talks, (Thomas, Springfield, Ill., 1987).

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